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**CALCUTTA CIPHER:
Travellers and the City**

John Hutnyk

Everyone thinks that Calcutta is saying something. That it is a message, a sign, and all we need to do is crack the code (Susie)

It bears repeating: the Frommers guide to India declares that “everything you ever heard about Calcutta is true” (1984: 195)! This astonishing statement proclaims Calcutta as a cipher, an icon that comes to stand for many different, contradictory and even impossible things. Divorced from ‘truth’ through the extravagance of the claim, the sensations and curiosities of Calcutta take on a surreal shape and are consigned to the categories of myth and mystique.

It was an old commonplace among some administrators of the British Raj that ‘for everything that is true in India, its opposite will also be true’ — in this context, everything that travellers say about Calcutta, all the deliberations of academics and politicians at the Calcutta 300 tricentenary seminars,^{1a} the planners’ versions of the future of the city, every commentary and documentary, every photograph, and so on, appears as a kind of illusion. In this incarnation Calcutta exists as a metaphor, an imaginary space, a restless marker and a code for meanings which are located... where?

The ‘truth’ of Calcutta is, of course, also an ideological issue, and some authors have noted the dangers of acceptance and tolerance of illusions, in that suffering and distress can be dismissed as illusion by those with the luxury to do so (Hanfi 1988: 27). Increasingly, issues of representation are recognised as important aspects in the cultural politics of evaluation and opinion about places, people and things. Reputations are linked closely to representations and to the distribution of value-laden images among varied groups of observers, in varied locations, with varying degrees of opportunity to challenge, confirm, or contribute to the circulation of these images.

The reputation of Calcutta figures high on the list of reasons given by travellers in India for visiting or not visiting the city. With few exceptions people have preconceived notions about what to expect, and they judge accordingly. Even those who express an open attitude to the city and come “just to see what its really like” (Janet), cannot say they have no expectations — indeed, it would be almost impossible, and undesirable, for there to be any possibility of writing Calcutta onto “a clean slate” (Janet). The main themes revolve around notions of poverty, overcrowding and urban decay — tracing the emergence of these representations would require a thorough survey of immense historical and literary productions over

the past 300 years, taking in sources as diverse as the records and experiences of the colonial administrators and officials of the East India Company, the works of a wide range of authors from Rudyard Kipling to Amitav Ghosh, as well as travel literature, government reports, forms of mass media and a host of other communicative practices which can be said to impact upon the ways individuals think of the places of the world. Plainly such a task would be exhausting and near impossible.¹

What can be achieved instead, is a limited examination of traveller points of view on Calcutta. These views are interesting because they are those of visitors who have not stayed long enough to become 'acclimatised' — "you can't get used to this city" (Peter) — and yet they are not completely subject to the dictated 'impressions' of promotional or academic literature and received opinion — "try not to make assumptions" (Gail). Many of the travellers who stayed for more than a few weeks in the dormitories of Sudder Street guest houses expressed a healthy disregard for the stereotyped and superficial presentations of the Lonely Planet guide and books such as *The City of Joy*. This is not to say that budget travellers have any more or less insight into some kind of 'real' Calcutta than others, nor that their impressions could be any more authoritative than those of Calcutta residents (although they sometimes claimed such arrogance), or of the scholars and dignitaries who gathered to comment on Calcutta at forums such as the Calcutta 300 seminar or conferences at the History Institute. Such travellers are heavily influenced by the literature and other media they consume before, during and after their visit. Reproduction of the metaphoric register of this representation circles back upon itself and more often than not experiences in Calcutta are informed and understood in terms derived from already received versions of the city. Moreover, discrepancies of representation give — for visitors at least — greater weight to European representation than any local code, with the greatest attention being directed to the opinions of the famous visitors to the city, the Kiplings, Malles and Günter Grass.²

What follows is a discussion of opinion about Calcutta expressed by travellers doing volunteer work (3-6 months) at a local street clinic and living in the glamorous decay of the Modern Lodge budget guest house.³

* * *

Poverty is possibly the major foreign trope of Calcutta; from the works of academics and filmmakers, from the tracts on the city by travel writers and the backpacker guidebooks, to the comments of aid workers and short-term visitors. The reputation of Calcutta in this regard is supported, in large part, by the international reputation of Mother Teresa. Add to this the undeniable and quite visible economic hardship of those who live on the pavements of the city and the effects of successive waves of migration from the countryside after floods, famines and wars. The continued destabilisation of the regional economy can be traced back to the two partitions of Bengal and the lingering effects of the Raj and British colonisation, and the effects of aspects of the global economy of capitalism — to which Calcutta and its people are subject — means that there should be no surprise that Calcutta has its share

of 'the poor'. But there are those who would question attempts to single Calcutta out as 'more impoverished' than other places. It is not a far-fetched idea to suggest that the Mother Teresa enhanced version of Calcutta's poverty has implications and explanations which go beyond the immediate material conditions of those who live on the streets and in the bustees. The exemplary status of poverty in Calcutta has to be understood as a function of this international reputation, revealingly noted by one traveller:

Calcutta is famous for its poverty — one of its tourist attractions, and it doesn't have many. Yet it doesn't seem as bad as some other cities, sure, there's no area that doesn't have bustees or street dwellers, but... (Mary)

In another Indian city a conversation between two travellers suggested much about the importance of reputation in determining itineraries and opinions: Rob: "Calcutta, terrible place", Rachel: "have you ever been there?" Rob: "No, but I've read about it, and I've been to Bombay". Whatever the status of descriptions and opinions of Calcutta, 'the poor' as a category of human existence deserve more thoughtful consideration. Such a homogenising category cannot provide much analytical value, and its evocation entails a literary gesture towards images such as Dickensian London or an unfounded comparison with 'the starving millions in Africa'. The category of 'the poor' as used by some westerners can have very little reference to people at all, as a volunteer explained when discussing other workers in Calcutta:

I don't think the term 'the poor' means much. It's not about people. An Irish nun working at Mother Teresa's talked about the 'beauty of the poor', and even though she meant well, it's as if 'the poor' are forever a category and will never change, will remain forever 'beautiful', and always poor (Kit)

Other references to poverty are appropriate in different ways. One volunteer said that people who suffer are there to "keep us compassionate", reminding us not to become indifferent "which would be the worst form of living death" (Samantha). This volunteer did not understand "how people can commit atrocities without a twinge of guilt at the sight of suffering" (Samantha). When questioned by another volunteer, she recognised that her views implied the idea that those who suffer were there as a kind of 'compassion register' for her benefit. The debate that ensued revolved around accusations of misunderstandings of her motives, the unfair attribution of an uncaring attitude and a lack of recognition on her part of exploitative relationships. While this was not the intention of the observation that 'the poor' were not there to provide a moral 'reminder' to the western traveller, the displacement of this argument onto the terrain of caring attitudes and action revealed again that investment in notions of poverty and suffering on the part of western volunteers often had more to do with their own interests, values and priorities, than with the interests of those that they purport to defend.

There were those who were able to recognise Calcutta's poverty in some sort of context, where the "myths about Calcutta poverty are true" (Hannah) and the "horrid and extreme things in Calcutta" (Hannah) were recognised as similar to things found in other cities, but which had become "epics" in the stories told of the city.

A somewhat different orientation from another traveller who had worked long-term at the clinic, despite some rather unsupported 'explanations' of the caste system, gained significant approval from the group who heard his justification:

We owe a debt to the poor — since like the brahmins who profit from the structures of caste, we in the West have profited from the third world — our debt then takes the form of intervening in the system that keeps the poor poor (Mitch)

The problem with this is that there is no guarantee that the interventions of western charity workers will not simply reassert the patronising relationships that reinforce the inequities that Mitch wants to identify in both caste and India-West relations.

Many of the back-packing travellers who pass through Calcutta are not wholly unreflective about their situation in travelling. Their reflections, such as they are, may be naive, but also reveal the presence of a kind of popular culture critique of travel, a perspective on the ethical problems of otherness, and a recognition that their experience is filtered through the technological perception they carry with them. Their critique of tourism manifests itself in a) the search for 'authentic' experiences; b) dismay at the effect of tourism; and c) condemnation of other tourists and sometimes themselves. The correlates of these three moments are a) claims to the 'once in a lifetime' experience; b) nostalgia for the days when such and such a place was not so well known; and c) 'of course I'm doing it differently' stories.

The confusion which reigns in the heart of this kind of tourism is that the consumption of its product — insofar as this product is more than souvenirs — entails no obvious or easily accumulable tangible possession. 'Good works' and cultural capital are less easy to reinvest. However, all of the productions of these travellers — comments, letters, photos, and so on — amount to an overwhelming ethnographic archive which would repay investigation as the script of the on-going dynamics of capitalist appropriations and on-going constructions of cultural difference. And more than this, low-budget back-packer tourism plays a significant role in the world order of the capitalist cultural economy through the enormity of this archive of representations it helps produce. The ability to move to conveniently inexpensive market and service centres through the facility of international travel yields a relatively high buying power with attendant ideological, habitual and attitudinal consequences (back-packers who can live like Rajas in Indian towns at very small financial cost). A somewhat small but still significant economy revolves around middle-class youth travellers, and engraves the principles of consumption upon even the most ethereal aspects of their lives. The hypocrisy with which some travellers are condemned for renouncing materialism while looking for the cheapest guest house room or dorm for their ashram stay is relevant here. It would be an error to think that the global low budget 'banana-pancake trail'⁴ is not now an important component of the ideology of consumption. This can be fitted into much wider, but nevertheless crucial, international processes:

What characterises our situation is...the development of a world market, the power of multinational companies, the outline of a 'planetary' organisation, the extension of capitalism to the whole social body... At the same time, the means of exploitation, control and surveillance become

more and more subtle and diffuse, in a certain sense molecular (the workers of the rich countries necessarily take part in the plundering of the third world)...(Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 146)

So many travellers express an ambiguous uncertainty about their mode of travelling and its relation to codes of exploitation which they identify in their own practice at the same time as they differentiate it from all they themselves do. 'Yes I recognise the contradictions, but I try to avoid them myself' is almost always a self-serving claim — a rationalisation. At the same time an intuition that this gambit is also inadequate completes a kind of popular reflexivity which is not surprising given the difficulty of identifying and understanding the complexities of life within late twentieth century capitalism. The complexities of the task of naming the dilemmas of our involvement in the abstract internationalisms of tourism, cultural difference, imperial exploitation, charity, and so on, make it important to ask questions about the ways travellers do name these things.

One traveller explained her repeated returns to work in Calcutta with a curious reference to one of the prevalent afflictions suffered by children who live on the streets. Referring to the city, she said: "it gets under your skin like scabies" (Sue). Many of the volunteers at the clinic were second, or even third time, visitors, having become enamoured with the place: "if you stay just two days it's horrid, if you stay longer you get to love it" (Dieter). The days fill up with 'routines' and recognitions which change surprises into familiarity. Some expectations dissolve, while other prejudices are confirmed. "Everyone is disappointed that Calcutta is not more difficult" (Susie). The cyclical nature of routine works in a number of ways to sustain the traveller in a strange environment. Habits form quickly to enable the sorting and editing of the hundreds of things which would otherwise demand attention — decisions to ignore something or other, to postpone, to omit, a repertoire of devices, conscious and unconscious, to order experience:

I expected something more from the black hole, and I still find it a little strange that it's not a nightmare, it even seems somewhat normal. Well, not normal, but capable of seeming normal once you have got your routines sorted out (Will)

Metaphors of travel provide a way of making sense of Calcutta, allowing travellers to express problems of orientation, of finding a way through the labyrinth or the maze that is the city. These kinds of metaphors are especially appropriate vehicles for travellers searching to find their way in a strange city which is *visited* but not *known* in the way a home town might be. The modes of concentration required by the visitor are different: "walking through the streets can be tough, and sometimes you forget to look at what is going on, concentrating too much on your destination" (Cecilia — a criticism of tourists made by Nietzsche (1969), who said that like stupid and sweating animals climbing a mountain, they forget to stop on the way and admire the views). Attempting to solve the maze, to orient oneself, or simply wandering in a kind of random pattern, are commonly presented as the 'project' of being in Calcutta, as well as being claimed by some (Adrienne) as a metaphor of self discovery.

An important aspect of the labyrinth metaphor is the idea of exploration. Calcutta as a site for endless discovery is often discussed, to the extent that sometimes “the longer you stay here the more you realise you hardly know the place at all” (Peter). Just what it takes to ‘discover’ Calcutta, as the travel brochures and guidebooks would have you do, is a matter of quite different opinions. One volunteer expressed her view with some frustration:

You need to stay here fifteen years before you understand anything. How long do you need to stay in Calcutta? How long could you stay? (Fiona)

Another volunteer, who had heard the above comment, wrote:

Calcutta is my example as I sit in its stomach. How could one begin to describe this city — its audacious to try — an English girl, ignorant of language, culture, politics, here for a pitiful few months; with my bias, prejudices and all the preconceptions of a ‘western’ upbringing, I’m exposed to the most miniature part, without the facilities to make sense of it. And yet images crowd in, impress themselves, force thought, and I have to find its expression in myself. Calcutta speaks but so much of it is noise and I hesitate to separate out individual voices as something suggests I can never understand them (Tammy, letter)

Another visitor observed that the tourist-volunteers seemed to be put, or put themselves, into a situation where everything they ever believed could be questioned. Where nothing was certain anymore, and nothing secure, (Susie) it was difficult to find your way but you had a responsibility to do so, however different ‘reality’ might be to the ways it had previously appeared. Unfamiliarity is an enabling condition for some travellers. Adrienne tramps the streets, almost lost, and says: “I see more when I’m feeling lost, not frightened, but just a little unsure of the way, I look more closely” (Adrienne). This theme of loss appears often in the more ‘counter-cultural’ kinds of expression: “you come here not so much to find yourself as to lose yourself” (Helen), and: “to disappear into the confusion of differences which is Calcutta, and India, where you have to reinvent your identity because all convenient reference points — from toilets to language — are displaced” (Roland). When confused and average middle-class youth travels to a place where they can only lose their way — for all the learning experiences and ‘character building’ aspects of this kind of travel — the political and ideological consequences and context of international budget travel become obvious. Representations became cluttered, chaotic. Home, order and predictable familiarity are privileged in contrast to the ‘disorder’ of difference.

When the metaphoric register expands into unexpected realms, such as another variant of the labyrinth offered by Catherine, diverse effects need to be analysed:

Calcutta is crazy like an ants nest upon which someone has poured boiling water. Everyone is trying to get from one place to another at the same time with no rules, except maybe the social version of the random particle theory — people moving about at varied speeds and no possibility of prediction of the inevitable occasional collisions (Catherine)

Lévi-Strauss sometimes described social life in similar terms (1966), and the separation of the observer and context which operates in such descriptions is a recurrent one in western sociology. At the same time, the scientific gesture claims

some affinity with the natural sciences and attempts to predict the workings of the world. Understandings expressed through these kinds of metaphors — be they those of the social scientist or of the speculating traveller — are suspect not least of all in their importation of images from strange categories to make sense of human lifestyles — people are not ants, nor are they particles in an atom — however much they may drive themselves towards destruction. “This is a more natural city, everyone does whatever they want. Look at how they drive all over the road” (Rachel).

Accidents do happen, and the traffic situation does generate a number of interesting comparisons:

Calcutta is vastly different to Delhi, which is for tourists just a vast arrival station of cultural differences. It's a simple opposition; the culture you left against a new and fascinating-confusing one. People don't stay in Delhi long, whereas in Calcutta tourists have more time and are forced to negotiate their differences — to navigate the traffic, not always managing to avoid a few bumps and scrapes. The taxis in Calcutta have lots of dents — in Delhi you're either fine or smashed by a bus (Birgit)

Calcutta could be described as a city of intensities, in many ways it is overdetermined in the understandings of travellers, for example in the anthropomorphic attribution of certain qualities to the city — it is the face of a woman for some, one eye crying, the other smiling (mentioned by the filmmaker Mrinal Sen at a Calcutta 300 seminar and repeated by several of the traveller-volunteers who had attended). In another conception ‘the city has a soul, you can feel it’ (Alan). This possession of a soul was identified by Alan after just three days in the city, although it's important to note that the Lonely Planet guidebook ends its Calcutta section with just the same words — “Calcutta has a soul” — providing short-term visitors with a language through which the mismatch of expectations and experiences can be resolved.

To have a soul — Calcutta must be human after all! On a human scale. As if it somehow wasn't, as if it were only a gross machinery of bodies, a conglomeration, overcrowded, urban horror. In discussions focusing on this image of the city, a rhetorical question raised again the idea of contradiction: “Can you have Krsna and capitalism at the same time?” (Ian). This volunteer offered the opinion that Calcutta had a specific mode of ‘enabling’ cynicism which “is based upon contradiction as a way of life” (Ian).

As a pastiche of heterogenous elements, Calcutta appeals to a sense of familiar incongruity. For one medical student on university holiday this became a “melody of forms, besmirching pure categories in complicated and seemingly transgressive blends and blurs” (John, letter). A poetically overdetermined way of describing the spectacle. The volunteer who wrote this in a letter to me after returning to Melbourne had said earlier that the best thing about Calcutta was the mixture of items for nostalgia. He was fascinated with “sixties watches, fifties films, forties motorcycles and cars” (John) and a host of other icons of world culture somehow jumbled all together without care for their proper temporal location.

Yet fifties movies and forties cars don't seem as important for the Indian experience of some travellers as are the sixties drugs which prevail in some sections

of the 'banana pancake trail'. Calcutta itself was described by one guest house rooftop smoker as "an L.S.D. trip without the drugs" (James). Such confused modes of thinking (or lack thereof) were responsible for numerous ridiculous perceptions of India. Gita Mehta's book *Karma Cola*, on the hippy-spiritual exploration of India still proves relevant when considering the activities of a great many of the middle-class western travellers on the circuit. In Calcutta the 'drug-scene' is perhaps a little less visible than other parts, possibly because the hashish available on the street is often inferior to that available elsewhere, and because the 'quality' consumable drug in the area is heroin, a drug which western users treat in more circumspect ways. Drug use and a kind of wide-eyed spiritual quest often go together among budget travellers in India, and while the west coast and the far north — places like Pushkar, Jaisalmer and Manali — are among the most popular locations for 'heads', Calcutta is not without a number of them. An attempt at a serious interview with a very stoned traveller in a coffee shop was abandoned in laughter — by all present — when India was described as "a spiritual disneyland", and as being "like a brontosaurus" because it was "thin at one end, Kashmir, fat in the middle, Bombay to Calcutta, and thin again at the other end, Madras" (Gabby). A serious study of this discourse might nevertheless find some threads of coherence and continuity among the representations of such travellers. The incorporation of aspects of Indian philosophical and spiritual concepts into traveller understandings (some would insist that these are misunderstandings) is a recurrent theme.

To an extent the trope of the market commodifies everything for the tourist. Bargaining structures relationships and India becomes one enormous colourful bazaar. The comparative financial security of even the traveller with a well-considered, albeit tight, budget seems to transform everything into the evaluative framework of money. Travel can be seen as a training ground for unabashedly extravagant consumption as travellers bargain and calculate what for them are the most minute amounts. The evident financial security of the western traveller attracts, not unexpectedly, repeated requests for assistance from beggars and street children. Traveller opinion about begging is mixed. Responses vary from the granting of small requests, through strategies condoned by the Lonely Planet guide to curb 'excess' such as only giving a rupee or two on every second morning, to complete refusal and sometimes expressions of anger. The persistence of some beggars, especially those who mill around the tourist establishments, becomes too much for less tolerant travellers. Others become skilled at ignoring requests, or favour the most abject and old. Some travellers are taken by boisterous children demanding piggy-back rides as well as ice-creams, chicken dinners and rupees. It is often those in the most need who are least able to utilise the established avenues, forms and protocols of tourist begging. It is also certain that the few returns that beggars gain from tourists amount to only a very minor improvement of their material circumstances.

The market turns to a kind of carnival where begging competition for the infrequent acknowledgements of tourists is most congested. Outside the India Museum on Chowringhee, begging blends into a kind of alternative theatre, ranging from chalk drawings on the pavement to more surreal performances. The sometimes dismal effect of this was described by one traveller in detail:

I only like the beggars who provide a bit of a show, more than pathetic asking for rupees. Like the boy who buries his head in sand in a hole in the footpath outside the museum. I'm more inclined to give money for that rather than for some half convincing expression of misery by someone who minutes before was arguing with a neighbour or playing with a child. The kids who run across the road to drop before you and twist their legs up under them are almost worth the show — it's theatrical — but of course the real cripples and the really abject don't get a look in (Will)

This situation borders on the callous, where recognition of a problem seems to lead to the most inequitable of possible responses. The commercialisation of all things within the economy permits travellers to experience India as a market side-show.

And the market as a site of consumption offers other metaphors — the meat section of New Market suggesting to one traveller-volunteer that Calcutta was a 'raw' city, in the flesh, clear to the bone. He said: "there are no compromises — the city is raw — it's difficult to deal with its fantastic and immediate honesty" (William) and he continued curiously: "even the lies it tells you are true, even the rip-offs are sweet, you've got to appreciate this" (William). Calcutta is also described as a kind of cannibal: "feeding on the countryside, swallowing whole families, sucking them in at Sealdah station, the cities jaws" (Sam). Calcutta also "absorbs travellers into its teeming mass like a giant snake" (John). Evocative of the city's favourite goddess Kali, who wears a garland of the skulls of her consumed husbands, the place "chews people up and spits them out on the street as bones" (John). Travellers, of course, are not wholly consumed in the same ways, and may indeed be considered somewhat irrelevant to the city's commercial diet. In a taped interview, the presence of foreign tourists was considered insignificant:

It wouldn't be any different if Westerners didn't come, the city doesn't have any mechanism that specifically deals with us tourists, it just folds us up into itself as it does with every other group. However different, however rich or artificially ragged — I mean those who dress up after some image of mystic India — however various the types of tourist, they don't seem to stand out in Calcutta. The city eats them up, consumes them — it digests everything (John)

The metaphoric registers of travellers' Calcutta are sometimes most bleak, and time spent in the city can be depressing and an ordeal. It should be no surprise that there have been suicides inside the guest houses of Sudder Street, although perhaps fewer than some would expect. At times Calcutta can be far too much, and the available images articulate a kind of despair:

My version of Calcutta seems as ominous and dark as I feel — rats and sewers, a brewing, hovering monstrosity lurks the streets. The terrible stoneman from the Telegraph newspaper stories [the so-called stoneman who, over a period of six months or more, attacked sleepers on the streets in the small hours, smashing their skulls with a rock] killing destitutes under Howrah Bridge — all this imagery of destruction and decay suits my temperament, my resentment (Michael)

It is this kind of statement that accords with so much of the western academic and media stereotyping of the city as a 'model of urban hell', as described by visiting scholar, Leonard Gordon at one of the Calcutta 300 seminars in 1990. In a lecture at the History Institute, Gordon described western visitors' experiences of Calcutta over the last three hundred years as a mixture of horror and fascination. He suggested three main images that belonged to the model of urban hell in Calcutta — refugees, the black hole and the Kali temple. His litany of other peoples insults to Calcutta showed much about the general North American fear of the place, but whether these 'hellish' representations are, indeed, representative of Calcutta was not discussed in detail at the seminar. Many in the audience thought that Gordon's paper only repeated various platitudes without further comment. The suggestion was made from the floor that articulation of stereotypes does not do enough to dislodge them unless it is placed in an analytical context which transforms understanding.

The model of 'urban hell' is a pervasive one; it informs many comparisons with other cities, most often New York: "this is what New York will look like in twenty years" (Rachel). Urban chaos is cause for distress for many travellers, and almost invariably some form of 'culture shock' featured in tales of first impressions and arrival scenes. When Fiona first came to Calcutta she hated it. She said she'd had to get drunk and talked for six hours with her Irish partner before she was able to deal with the view out of her window: "I had to keep getting up to see that it really was India out there—I just couldn't believe what I saw, such crowds" (Fiona).

There is, of course, no one version of the city. Everyone has their own version, and indeed some traveller-volunteers express very different ideas of the city over the time of their stay. This was evident most clearly when, after more than two years, I formally sat down with the long-term volunteer Peter (a doctor) to discuss Calcutta on tape. Peter thought that the process of defining and coming to understand a little of what happened to longer-term visitors to Calcutta was important. They come to change their minds about some things, and then change them again, over and over. He said:

Calcutta is an international city in the first instance, although this point is generally missed because those outside Calcutta have antiquated views of the city. I believe there is no final version of Calcutta, only many, and they are scattered all over the world, hence it's an international city... This, I think, means not only that every tourist that has been here has a different version of the city, but that everyone has many versions, many impressions, even you and I, each of the Bengalis, everyone will have a number of different Calcuttas. And the healthy thing about this sick city is that just when you begin to feel comfortable and understand something it turns around and throws you. The longer I stay the less I know (Peter)

With so many possible Calcuttas is it any wonder that contradiction and confusion, repetition and reversal are dominant themes. If everything you ever heard about the city is as dialectical as this, is it any wonder that the city has such exemplary status.

Among all the images which are invoked for the city, for many the most grim is that of death. Rajiv Gandhi, as well as visitors like Patrick Swayze and Günter Grass

have all linked the city to death. In a rather angry dismissal of the city, one traveller exclaimed:

Calcutta is a dead city. Full of shit. Sure, you can see the life of the people here, or go to some concerts, but it was born a long time ago and has now died. Can't you smell it? (Gian)

Certainly the city smells; a consequence of limited public conveniences and inadequate sewerage facilities inherited from the days of the British Raj. This is a major shock for a good number of visitors and a source of great frustration for many residents and for the municipal authorities. Yet obituaries written by tourists may well be a little premature. It is more appropriate to recognise the vitality of the city as a way, perhaps, of contesting the dead weight of these negative images. As another traveller pointed out: "at first you only see the people in rags, later on you notice the middle classes, but even the poor have more dignity and more 'life' in their poverty than many other people" (Joe).

"For better or worse, Calcutta will remain a symbol of the future" (Roland). Some travellers insisted that Calcutta was not India (Fiona). But neither could it be easily imaged as India's future, because its kaleidoscope imagery included a historical nightmare known as the 'black hole'. Others indicated that Calcutta was simply exaggerated India, an idea that was also held by those who hadn't come:

When I told people at home I was going to India they looked at me in disbelief, and told me of the horrors there. When they found out I was going to be in Calcutta for a month they were aghast. They get these ideas from t.v. (Amy)

Its an experimental place — take mud, people, cows, buildings and heat and stir it all up with the books of Marx and statues of Lenin (Peter)

As a cipher Calcutta is always about to be de-materialise in traveller talk — where whole cities are evaluated and references disappear in the haze, having become invisible it is as if they were never there. Susie said I would "have to write anti-myths about Calcutta", but perhaps Calcutta vanished as soon as a collection of its descriptions began. In another version of the city, it's not a black hole, but a matter of intensities of light and sound, where the locations are film sets and voiceboxes — image drifts and audio-circuits, subways and vistas, a landscape full of signatures and gossip, postponed and delayed and relayed throughout the looping media circuits of an ideological Calcutta that has shifted from its geographical moorings. This is Calcutta as a universal cipher — you can never leave the city, the train never pulls out of Howrah, you are stuck at Sealdah, an interminable journey which recurs and recurs.⁵

NOTES

1a. The Calcutta 300 seminars were well attended public meetings to discuss the tricentenary and the ongoing festivities commemorating the 300th anniversary of Job Charnok's first visit to the site of this city.

1. Forty years of work by P. Thankappan Nair will shortly culminate in a multi-volume bibliographical survey of Calcutta which will be an amazing boon for scholars of the city. Several interesting volumes have appeared to coincide with the tricentenary commemoration of Job Charnock's arrival on the site of present day Calcutta in 1690, a short review essay by Partho Datta (1992) entitled "Celebrating Calcutta" covers the most readily available publications. The accessibility of these reviews is my excuse for avoiding background literature in this essay, and this includes the extensive material on tourism and representation which is also relevant to this project — best exemplified by Malcolm Crick's bibliographical review in Chai (1988), his *Social Analysis* article (1985), and forthcoming book.
2. Grass visited the city for six months in 1987, amidst some controversy. During a Calcutta seminar he declared; "God shat, and there was Calcutta". An almost audible tension was only somewhat covered by his quick addition; "But when God shat bricks, there was Frankfurt". Grass produced a book of sketches and story soon after his visit (Grass 1989).
3. My thesis work will deal more fully with life at this rather dilapidated traveller haunt. The thesis is an attempt to locate low-budget traveller's experience in Calcutta within the wider context of international travel, imperialism and capitalism.
4. I have used this term to refer to the duplication throughout Asia of budget guest-houses serving touristic 'comfort foods' which are little different to the fare available in such places world-wide. Peter Phipps takes up this issue in a thoughtful study of Australian budget travellers (Phipps 1990: 16).
5. The interviews for this paper were conducted during several trips to Calcutta between 1987 and 1992. This is part of a larger project on representation, and versions of this material have been reworked in various places: a shorter version of this paper appeared in *The Telegraph* a West Bengal daily; an essay on tourist photography appeared in Calcutta in September (1992a), and an extended review of the film *City of Joy* will appear in a special issue of *Agenda* in December(1992b). Many people deserve to be thanked for their participation in this project; as interviewees, influences and readers, and I thank them all.

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